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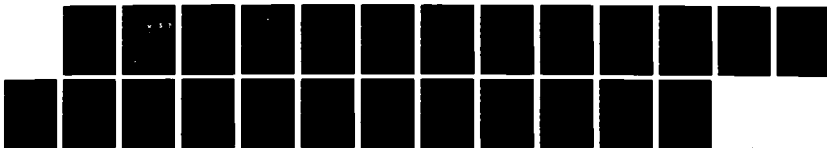
THE AVIATION OFFICER BASIC COURSE AND THE PLATOON  
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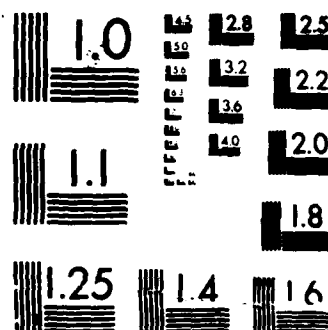
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# AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

## STUDENT REPORT

THE AVIATION OFFICER BASIC COURSE  
AND THE PLATOON COMMANDER

MAJOR RICHARD A. SCALES

87-2215

*"insights into tomorrow"*

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**TITLE** THE AVIATION OFFICER BASIC COURSE  
AND THE PLATOON COMMANDER

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Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for graduation.

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE  
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## PREFACE

The Aviation Officer Basic Course (AVNOBC) provides the basic branch education for new lieutenants assigned to Army Aviation. It is during Phase I of this course (prior to flight school) that the new lieutenants are instructed in basic soldiering, leadership, and officership skills and combined arms tactics. Unlike officer basic courses of past years, this one has assigned aviation captains serving as platoon commanders who remain with the lieutenants throughout Phase I. In addition to instructing in many areas (particularly in the field environment), they are advisors, counselors, and role models for the lieutenants and observe and evaluate the leadership and officership potential of each lieutenant. The purpose of this article is to inform the Army Aviation community of the purpose, scope, and content of the AVNOBC; discuss the role of the platoon commander; and examine the effectiveness of the role of platoon commander and the course.

Subject to clearance, this manuscript will be submitted to the United States Army Aviation Digest for consideration. It is presented in a format acceptable to the publisher. The most notable deviations from the ACSC format are the use of endnotes rather than the reference-by-number bibliography system and double spacing instead of single spacing for the manuscript.

With the exceptions noted, all information contained in this article is based on the personal experience of the author after having been directly involved with the AVNOBC for over two years.



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Major Richard A. Scales, US Army, is the former commander of Company D, 6th Aviation Training Battalion, the AVNOBC training company. His other assignments have included Executive Officer of the 6th Aviation Training Battalion, AH-64 Training Development Team Coordinator, M-1 Main Battle Tank Test Officer, and various positions in an Assault Helicopter Company and an Air Cavalry Troop. His military education includes the US Army Command and General Staff College, the Armor Officer Basic and Advance Courses, the Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Course, and the Operations Research/Systems Analysis Military Applications Course I. He holds a BS degree from Louisiana Tech University and a MS degree from the University of Southern California. Major Scales is currently attending the US Air Force Air Command and Staff College.



THE AVIATION OFFICER BASIC COURSE  
AND  
THE PLATOON COMMANDER

INTRODUCTION

Army Aviation became a basic branch of the Army on 12 April 1983. This generated the requirement for Aviation Branch to provide professional military education to its Aviation Branch lieutenants. Fort Rucker happily assumed this mission rather than continue relying on other branch service schools. Training developers and many others intently went about the business of creating the Aviation Officer Basic Course (AVNOBC) instructional materials and obtaining necessary support equipment, supplies, facilities, and personnel. Flight school was to be the branch specific portion of the AVNOBC and was already a proven entity; therefore, the concentrated effort was expended on the creation of AVNOBC, Phase I. The hard work paid off. The first class began on 1 July 1984, a year earlier than originally planned, and the course has enjoyed much success since. What makes this course different from other officer basic courses of past years is its purpose and, moreover, the method for achieving that purpose.

AVNOBC, Phase I is 9.5 weeks of intensive training aimed at developing basic officer soldiering skills and tactical knowledge in the combined arms arena prior to flight school. In addition to the tactical and professional common military subjects, the course designers were interested in evaluating subjective leadership and officership qualities. Course designers recognized immediately that this type of evaluation could not be accomplished in a sterile classroom environment; so, a company organization (Company D, 6th Aviation Training Battalion) was formed with the capability of providing situational leadership training and evaluation in conjunction with conducting over 50% of the course content. Key to the company's accomplishment of that mission was the creation of platoon commander positions. This article discusses the role of the AVNOBC, Phase I, platoon commander and the impact of that role on course effectiveness and the future of Army Aviation. First, however, it is important to understand the AVNOBC, Phase I, content, the organization for training, and the leadership training methodology.

#### AVNOBC. PHASE I. CONTENT

When discussing the AVNOBC, Phase I, content, it is important to know how this phase fits into the total AVNOBC training picture. The entire program contains 45 weeks of training divided into three phases. Phase I, the subject of this article, is discussed in more detail later. Phase II, which is commonly referred to as flight school, contains the lion's share of the

branch specific technical portion of the AVNOBC. This phase lasts 34 weeks and encompasses all flight training including ground school. Finally, the last two weeks of training, Phase III, can be thought of as a re-greening period and also contains training in the tactical employment of aviation units in the combined arms arena. The entire AVNOBC is a well-balanced program for bringing new lieutenants into the fold of Army Aviation.

It is vital that the lieutenants become proficient aviators with the ability to tactically employ their aircraft and units. However, it is all the more critical that each gains a firm foundation in combined arms doctrine, common officership skills, and, most importantly, the fundamentals of leadership. AVNOBC, Phase I, is designed to meet this challenge with a variety of training events.

Phase I is a dynamic, action-packed, 9.5 weeks with over 496 hours of instruction and related activities. Figure 1 shows the hours programmed for each major section of the course.<sup>1</sup> After in-processing and completion of flight physicals, the course shifts quickly into high gear. While in garrison, each day begins at 0515 hours with physical training (PT). During the first week, PT is cadre led. After that, the students train themselves under cadre guidance in accordance with FM 21-20, Physical Readiness Training. Experience is gained in a wide variety of PT activities such as running, guerrilla drills, grass drills, road marches, aerobics, team sports, rifle drills and

<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>RESPONSIBLE AGENCY</u>	
	<u>DCAT*</u>	<u>DELTA COMPANY</u>
Military History	6	
Leadership	68	
Military Law	6	
Communicative Arts	26	
Medical Subjects	7	
Land Navigation	3	13
Weapons		18.5
Communications/Electronics	10	
Maintenance & Supply	23	
Training Management	7	8
Combined Arms Subjects	50	12
Safety	5	
Field Training		85
Examinations	14	
In/Out Processing		48
Platoon Commander's Time		25
Physical Fitness		62
Totals	225	271.5
* Department of Combined Arms Tactics		

Figure 1 AVNOBC Program Hours

runs, and protective mask runs. The end result of the PT program is a physically fit lieutenant with a broad knowledge of a variety of physical fitness activities and some of the physiological principles involved. While physical fitness is stressed, the lieutenants are also challenged academically.

Much of the course consists of a wide variety of classroom academic instruction of which only five hours are directly related to aviation.<sup>2</sup> Little is taught or discussed concerning

aviation related topics for two primary reasons. First, to be an effective member of the combined arms team, one must possess a well-rounded knowledge of the other team members, including their doctrine and tactics. An understanding of ground operations will be essential to these future aviators in supporting the ground tactical commander. Second, a sound knowledge of infantry tactics can be translated into aviation tactics with a few adjustments in scale and speed. Therefore, the training emphasizes the other combat, combat service, and combat service support branches to ensure an understanding of how the other combined arms team players operate. Activities outside the classroom include day and night land navigation courses, patrolling, a tactical exercise without troops, student-taught classes, drill and ceremonies, and much more. The course culminates with a five-day field training exercise.

The field training exercise simulates combat unit (infantry) deployment and employment in a tactical training environment. In preparation for combat operations, the first two days are spent on the Fort Rucker ranges in intensified training. During this period, the lieutenants zero and qualify with the M-16 rifle, familiarize on the M-2 Caliber 50 and M-60 machineguns and the M72A2 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW), and receive training in air assault operations (from the infantry view point). Time is also spent rehearsing squad and platoon movement techniques and preparing for tactical employment. Early on the third day, an air assault mission takes the students to the area of operations,

where they overcome minimum resistance, followed by a move to a company assembly area. There the final phase of intensified training occurs with classes in attack helicopter call for support and platoon offense and defense operations. That afternoon the student company moves into and occupies a prepared position and plans for a night defense. Aggressors from Company C, 509th Infantry, aid tremendously in enhancing the realism with several probes of the position during the night. The following morning (fourth day), each squad is assigned a reconnaissance patrol mission; leaders are selected; plans are developed, briefed, and rehearsed; and each squad conducts its patrol. Upon return, the intelligence information gathered by one of the patrols is disseminated to the class. This information is used to plan for a platoon attack to occur against that reconnoitered position on day five. In addition to this platoon attack, the final day of field training includes a 12km squad forced march and the highlight of the course--a squad live-fire exercise in a combined arms environment. During the exercise, each squad employs and experiences the awesome destructive power of the combined arms team. Integral to this exercise is the employment of infantry squad organic weapons, artillery, attack helicopters, and a main battle tank. A final protective fire ends the exercise.

As one can readily see, AVNOBC, Phase I, is a varied and fast-paced course. To accomplish this, the Aviation Center has adopted a unique organizational relationship among trainers.

## ORGANIZATION FOR TRAINING

Two organizations at Fort Rucker share responsibility for training and developing each lieutenant attending the AVNOBC, Phase I. The Department of Combined Arms Tactics (DCAT) is responsible for knowledge-base classroom training and Company D, 6th Aviation Training Battalion, is responsible for practical application of that knowledge in both garrison and field environments. Constant coordination is required between DCAT and Delta Company to ensure consistency and mission accomplishment. To cite an example of the critical working relationship between the two, DCAT instructors teach the Army Training Management System, which includes how to conduct training, and Delta Company cadre assign and evaluate student-taught classes.<sup>3</sup> Close coordination is essential to ensure consistent standards. This analogy also holds true with the combined arms tactics training. DCAT teaches the classroom portion and Delta Company takes the lieutenants to the field for practical application.<sup>4</sup> While all training is important, probably the most important is in the development of leadership skills.

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Leadership training is incorporated into almost every aspect of the course. DCAT teaches the leadership core curriculum including the doctrine and "how to" classes, ethics, counseling, and general interpersonal skills. These classes provide a fundamental knowledge of people, techniques for dealing with and

motivating people, how to deal with people problems, and more.<sup>5</sup>

It is in Delta Company where the lieutenants apply this knowledge allowing them to learn through experience. Again, consistency between trainers is vital. To learn through experience, each lieutenant serves in various leadership positions.

To allow several opportunities for leadership experience, each AVNOBC, Phase I, class is divided into platoons of 35 to 50 students. While in garrison, this split, along with weekly rotation, allows every lieutenant at least one chance to serve as a leader within the platoon (i.e., platoon leader, platoon sergeant, or squad leader). Additionally, every lieutenant leads a squad in physical training and teaches at least one class to the others. Drill and ceremony training also provides leadership skill practice. Many serve in additional duty positions such as supply officer, academic officer, and security officer, all of which allow those selected a chance to exercise their leadership skills to a degree. While there are many opportunities for leadership experiences in garrison, many leadership challenges occur while in the field.

The AVNOBC, Phase I, students spend a total of eight days away from garrison during the course. As described earlier, there are three range days, a 72-hour FTX, a patrolling day, and a land navigation exercise day.<sup>6</sup> Each day brings with it many excellent opportunities to exercise leadership skills. Duties are rotated either on a timed basis or by "killing" student leaders during tactical exercises. On two of the range days, the



lieutenants run the ranges under Delta Company cadre supervision. The land navigation exercises provide each individual a chance to hone a skill enhancing the technical side of leadership. The real meat of the leadership practical application and learning comes during the FTX and patrolling. During these periods, approximately 75% of the lieutenants serve in normal infantry company leadership positions down to squad and patrol level in a simulated tactical environment.

Practical situational leadership opportunities are plentiful during Phase I of the AVNOBC. The key, however, is to learn from the experience. Situations must be developed; performance must be observed and evaluated; strong and weak points must be surfaced; and suggestions for future performance must be presented. To accomplish this, a capable individual must be available to observe. This individual is the platoon commander.

#### PLATOON COMMANDER ROLE

The platoon commander provides the bridge by which newly commissioned lieutenants cross from the commissioning source to the active Army. Each platoon commander is an aviation captain with unit experience who must be a proven performer and exhibit high moral and ethical character. A primary function of the platoon commander is the subjective evaluation of each lieutenant in the areas of leadership and officership. In order to do this, the platoon commander must be knowledgeable and experienced. More importantly, the platoon commander must be a model soldier--

an example for the lieutenants to observe and emulate. Each must personally adopt and model the values that form the basis for a distinct lifestyle and code of behavior, and each must be exceptionally self-disciplined and exhibit selfless service to the mission. The platoon commander must command confidence and respect as derived directly from expertise, proven excellence in the combined arms arena, and loyalty and dedication to the nation and profession. Without these qualities, there can be no credibility in the evaluation process. Should the lieutenants be presented a negative example, the mission will, in all probability, not be accomplished. There is much each platoon commander must learn to meet the challenges of the job.

Each officer selected to become a platoon commander must successfully complete an internal training program prior to assuming duties with a platoon of lieutenants. This program is designed to both train and evaluate the selectee in all areas. The goal is a platoon commander who is prepared mentally and physically to lead soldiers; who is skilled in combined arms tactics, doctrine, and weaponry; who inspires confidence and an eagerness to be part of the team; and who has the ability to analyze, the vision to see, the integrity to choose, and the courage to execute. With training complete, the qualified platoon commander is prepared to lead a platoon of lieutenants through the course.

There are a multitude of tasks each platoon commander performs with each AVNOBC, Phase I, class. Of primary importance

is for the platoon commander and the lieutenants to become acquainted. This begins during in-processing with a simple introduction and continues as the platoon commander accompanies the lieutenants through many of the in-processing tasks. Building the lieutenants' confidence in the platoon commander's expertise begins immediately with a detailed briefing and several classes presented by the platoon commander. From the onset, the lieutenants know the platoon commander is the one person from whom they should seek advice and counsel. The platoon commander will be with the lieutenants throughout the course, will sit with them during much of their classroom instruction, and will be their senior instructor when outside the classroom. This involvement is vital to accurate evaluation and counseling.

The platoon commander is required to counsel each lieutenant several times during the course, both formally and informally. Formal initial counseling occurs within the first two weeks to ensure each lieutenant understands the course standards, clear any misconceptions, check for personal or family problems, and gain an appreciation for the lieutenant's attitude, personal fiber, and goals as an officer. The remainder of the formal counseling sessions involve performance. They occur at mid-course, end-of-course, after each leadership position rotation, and upon noting significant outstanding, marginal, or substandard performance. Each platoon commander makes use of informal counseling as often as required for both positive and negative reinforcement.

The counseling program is heavily stressed for several reasons. First, the lieutenants need the feedback to gauge how they measure up against the standards and how to improve. Second, counseling is the major tool through which the platoon commander critiques each lieutenant's performance, leadership ability, and officership. Finally, the counseling provides examples of techniques for each lieutenant to use in the development of personal counseling techniques. So, the counseling is multipurposed in that it is not only used to inform but also used as a vehicle by which the lieutenants receive much of their counselor training.

Through the platoon commander, each lieutenant receives practical leadership experience in a variety of environments with positive and timely feedback. Mistakes are expected while learning from those mistakes is stressed. Complementary to this is the platoon commander's evaluation of each lieutenant's leadership and officership potential. The personal observation of individual performance, personal contact, and counseling (using a "whole person" concept), makes it possible for the platoon commander to evaluate each lieutenant accurately. The success of the platoon commander role is measured by effectiveness; so, how effective is the role of the platoon commander and the course?

### A MEASURE OF EFFECTIVENESS

A recent study conducted by the Directorate of Evaluation and Standardization found that, notwithstanding some problem areas in the AVNOBC curriculum, the quality of instruction was high.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent analysis shows a high degree of similarity between what is taught and what field commanders believe should be taught, especially in the area of leadership. Although not a specific study finding, the platoon commander does make a difference and vastly enhances the course effectiveness.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to quantifiably measure the effectiveness and impact of the platoon commander role in training Aviation Branch's newly commissioned lieutenants. Therefore, the effectiveness of the platoon commander role must be measured in relation to the impact of that role on the effectiveness of the course. The fact that the platoon commander is there modeling the positive traits of a leader and providing consistent guidance, counsel, coaching, teaching, and concern, should make a difference in the quality of the course. There are three major areas in which the platoon commander positively impacts the effectiveness of Phase I of the AVNOBC.

First, the platoon commander adds continuity to the training. The academic instructors rotate as the instructional phases change. The training company commander, and ultimately the system, is far removed from the everyday world of the lieutenants. Without the platoon commander, they would be on their own to synthesize, to interrelate, the phases of

instruction. The platoon commander fulfills this function through daily contact with the students and the academic instructors and an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum. This individual can provide additional instruction where needed and can field the inevitable "Why?" questions. The true synthesis of the AVNOBC, Phase I, material comes as the platoon commander evaluates and counsels the lieutenants on their performance in the course and their leadership abilities. Significantly, the platoon commander provides each lieutenant with a person, rather than a system, whose judgment and sincerity they trust, to whom they answer, and from whom they get counsel.

The second area in which the platoon commander adds to the effectiveness of training, and in which continuity is directly linked, is in leadership training. The academic instructors provide classroom instruction in leadership techniques, professional ethics, and other leadership block topics, and conduct practical exercises. But, the platoon commander is the one who assigns each lieutenant a leadership position; creates leadership challenges through situational development; observes, evaluates, and critiques performance; and suggests alternatives for future performance. The platoon commander observes and evaluates the professional character of each lieutenant on a continuous basis and provides feedback using FM 22-100, Military Leadership, definitions as a standard. Without a platoon commander, there would be no student leadership positions and the

best that could be hoped for in professional characteristic evaluation would be snap-shot glimpses.

The third, and most important, factor of effectiveness is in the area of mentorship. It is not expected that true mentorship relations exist between the platoon commander and the lieutenants. This implies something much larger than possible in 9.5 weeks. However, such a relationship may see a beginning because of the mentor-like actions of the platoon commander. The platoon commander helps the lieutenants grow in their profession. To accomplish this, the platoon commander not only observes, evaluates and counsels, but also befriends and, primarily, sets the example for the lieutenants in professional character and ethics by actions, words, and deeds. The goal is for the lieutenants to learn from observing the actions of the platoon commander. Aside from the training and evaluation duties, a very important task of the platoon commander is to provide advice and assistance in solving personal and professional problems. With young lieutenants seeing their first active duty assignment, problems abound and the platoon commander works painstakingly with the lieutenants to resolve the problems. This, too, is part of the example that is set not only for a lieutenant with a problem but also with the rest of the platoon. Even though it is up to the lieutenant to accept the platoon commander as a mentor, each platoon commander exhibits the qualities of mentorship thereby providing the lieutenants with a model to take with them throughout their careers.

So, it is in the areas of continuity, leadership training, and mentorship where the platoon commander positively impacts the effectiveness of the AVNOBC. By having such an impact on the course, the platoon commander role also impacts the future of the Aviation Branch in that the basic foundation, the cornerstone, of an officer's career is set during the AVNOBC. A highly effective and quality course will naturally set a higher point from which to start a career which should translate into a higher quality officer corps in the future. Phase I of the AVNOBC is such a course.

#### CAPSTONE

The AVNOBC, Phase I, is a tough and demanding course from which Aviation Branch's future leaders learn a great deal. To be a platoon commander requires an abundance of energy along with constant vigilance of actions, words and deeds to ensure the right example is consistently portrayed. The hard work does, however, pay off in many ways. The lieutenants grow professionally in a very short time due, in large part, to the positive impact of the platoon commander. Likewise, the platoon commander learns and grows professionally and receives an abundance of personal and professional rewards. In the end, however, it is Army Aviation that benefits.



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## FOOTNOTES

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